

Victor Banykin

**Where the
Birch
Trees Grow**

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Translated from the Russian by Tracy Kuehn



**Raduga Publishers
Moscow**

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ТАМ, ГДЕ ЖИВУТ БЕРЕЗЫ
На английском языке

© Издательство «Малыш», 1978 г.
© Издательство «Детская литература», 1982 г.
English translation © Raduga Publishers 1985. Illustrated

Printed in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics

Б 4803010102-504 020-85
031/05/-85

ISBN 5-05-000027-0

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MISHA'S VACATION

The Kapustkin Brothers

They fearlessly stood at the edge of the cliff. Those very birch trees which Mama had talked so much about.

"Hello, birch trees!" Misha said. He touched the rough trunks with his hands.

The birch trees stretched their tops to the sky. It was bright blue just like the lake spreading out at the bottom of the cliff.

Between the old trees crowding at the cliff's edge there were young

birch trees, pushing toward the sky on tiptoes. They were slim and light, and their bark was warm from the evening sun.

A bent, twisted birch stood sadly near the soot-blackened bathhouse which had sunk into the ground up to its windows.

"The wind is strong and cold in the winter. It did not let the birch tree grow straight and tall when it was little," Misha sighed. Then he looked at his grandfather's house. It was well protected by trees from the autumn winds and the long winter storms. It was made of thick, strong logs which had darkened with time. The shutters, eaves and the little balcony were decorated with fancy carvings.

Misha's mother had told him that Grandfather Yegor built that house right after the war. His old house had been burned down by the Nazis while Grandfather was away fighting, and Grandmother and their children were in evacuation in the Volga area.

"It would be great to learn Grandfather's trade," Misha said to himself. He thought about the lake that splashed at the bottom of the cliff. It was almost as big as a sea. He hadn't had time to get acquainted with it yet. He ran skipping along the path which twisted and turned through the grass.

Suddenly a round face with round eyes peeked out from behind a big birch tree.

"What are you doing ... spying?" Misha stammered.

The chubby, red-cheeked face hid behind the tree.

"Come out and we will get to know each other," Misha said.

"No way," the little boy huffed in a deep voice. "Who are you?"

"And who are *you*?" Misha asked him.

"Kapustkin," the little boy said after a pause. He blinked his pale eyelashes and puffed up his cheeks.

"Kapustkin?" Misha asked, trying not to laugh. "You are Kapustkin?"

"That's right. He and I are both Kapustkins," a gay voice answered from behind Misha's back.

Misha turned around and looked in surprise at a stocky boy. He had on a cap which rested on one of his protruding ears. Misha was still staring, but the boy smiled and held out his stubby, brown hand in friendship.



"*Terve!* That's how we say hello in Karelia."

"Hello," Misha said, and shook the older Kapustkin's strong hand.

"What's your name?"

"Misha. What's yours?"

"Pesha. And that's my brother, Vaslei. Everybody calls him Block."

Pesha glanced in the direction of the old birch tree.

"Come out from behind the tree, Vaslei. Why play hide-and-seek?"

"No way," the little boy repeated in a deep voice. He looked cautiously at Misha and moved back to another tree. From there he crept to a third. Then he raced off toward Grandmother's garden, holding his shorts up with his hand.

"He'll get used to you in a day or two," Pesha said, laughing. "Are you visiting your grandfather?"

Misha nodded.

"Where are you from?"

"We flew in a plane from Orenburg, but we don't live there. We live in the steppe. My Dad drills for oil."

"Are there big, tall oil wells where you live? And do they make holes in the ground?"

"That's right," Misha said. "There are tall oil wells and the steppe as far as you can see. And not one tree or bush."

"Wait a minute..."

"It's true. It's a growing... industry," Misha remembered the description he had heard many times. "Every year they pump more and more oil."

"Great!" Pesha said happily. "I would sure like to see your steppe. There is nothing special here. Just forests everywhere and lakes all over. People here make lumber. No big deal." Then, without a pause, he added: "Let's be friends, Misha."

Before Misha had time to answer Mama came out on the porch and called him to dinner.

"Go on," Pesha said. "My Mom is waiting for me too."

He shook Misha's hand and slowly walked to his house. It was behind Grandmother's garden.

Grandfather Yegor and Grandmother Marya

Once Grandfather Yegor and Grandmother Marya had a big family. Eight persons used to sit down to dinner. Now the old people lived alone. All their sons and daughters had grown up and moved away. The only thing left was pictures in frames in the front room.

Misha stopped in the doorway and stared at the huge samovar which was bubbling and whistling.

Grandfather sat at the head of the table with his back to the window opening out on the lake. Misha was still not used to his grandfather. He was so silent and stern-looking and had a jet-black beard.

Tall, thin Grandmother bustled about the samovar.

"Come in, my little chicks," the old woman cooed. "Olga, you sit here. And you, my little grandson, sit next to me." She stroked Misha's hair with her broad, strong hand.

"Misha is a man," Grandfather said. "Come here, son."

After climbing up on the tall bench next to Grandfather, Misha stole a look at his amazing beard. Grandfather sat straight, with his sinewy hands on the edge of the table. His eyelids, which were covered with wrinkles, were lowered, so Misha could not see his eyes. Were they kind or harsh?

"I apologize, my dears, but I can't offer you fish this evening," Grandmother said in a lilting voice as she carried white plates from the stove. "He's been haymaking these last few days," she continued, nodding at Grandfather. "He wasn't up for fishing after that. His back is bothering him. But I can offer you pancakes."

Grandmother put one plate in front of Grandfather and another in front of Misha. They were piled with mountains of steaming pancakes.

"Ohhh!" Misha said in surprise. "I can't eat that many!"

"Don't be stubborn," Grandmother told him as she put a bowl of sour cream on the table. "Like Grandfather said, you're a man."

Lake Vedlozero

After dinner Grandfather began to get ready to go somewhere. He put on waterproof pants and a warm sweater. Then he reached for his rubber boots, which were higher than his knees.

"Where are you going?" Misha asked, handing his grandfather a heavy boot.

"To put out the nets."

"Fishing?"

"Yep."

"Can I go with you?"

Grandfather nodded and looked at his grandson with approval.

"Are you in your right mind?" Grandmother said in alarm, as she cleared the table. "The boy had never seen water before and you want to take him out on the lake with those high waves." She spoke quickly and waved her arms about. "You shouldn't even go yourself. You are old and your back hurts. There's no hurry."

Grandfather slowly put on his boots and stamped his right foot and then his left. Then he looked up:

"There is no wind. And where are those waves you mentioned? My back's all right. Hurry up, Misha."

Misha, who had been about to cry, broke into a big smile.

A short time later Misha was sitting in an old, weather-beaten fishing boat. Grandfather settled in the stern and fiddled with the outboard motor. It coughed a couple of times and then began to roar. It sounded as if it was ready to explode, but Grandfather turned it down by moving a lever. They pulled away from the rocky shore and headed out into open water. Misha happily looked back at the receding cliff with the bath-house at the water's edge and at the tall birch trees, whose trunks were red from the sunset. He waved to Mama and Grandmother on the beach.

Grandfather turned the boat to the right, and the steep cliff with birch trees was left behind. Misha stared into the distance, where the darkness of the night had not yet rolled in and it was still comfortably light.

"Grandfather's lake is like a sea," Misha thought. "I can hardly see



the shore on either side, and I can't see the bank where the sun went down at all."

The boat continued to race forward, proudly throwing up its tar-coated bow. A gentle, sweet-smelling breeze blew in their faces. It was probably the smell of freshly cut grass from far off meadows.

Soon the motor was shut off, and it became very quiet. So quiet that Misha could hear the sound of cows mooing on the hilly shore in the distance.

"Are we here?" Misha asked.

"Yep," Grandfather nodded. He threw an anchor with a buoy over the stern.

Misha was just about to ask if he could help when Grandfather spoke:

"Put out the oars, Misha. Move them forward, lower them into the water, and then pull them toward you. That's it. More! A little more!"

While Misha, perspiring with effort, learned to work the oars, Grandfather let out yards of fine net, which was grass-green, just like the water.

The boat slowly moved from the spot where the cross-shaped buoy bobbed on the lazy waves, leaving birch floats in its path. Finally the last yard of net was thrown overboard and the second anchor followed.

"That's all, Misha," Grandfather said in a cheerful voice. "Raise the oars and put them in the boat. Good. You are a regular mate. The mosquitoes haven't eaten you alive, have they?"

"No, I'm O.K.," Misha said. He pushed his knit cap back and wiped his damp forehead with his mosquito bitten hand. "When do the fish come?" he asked.

Grandfather chuckled in his beard.

"We'll go after the fish in the morning. We'll test your luck. Maybe there'll be a good many fish in the net."

"I hope it will be full," Misha said.

The Fish

Who knows how long Misha would have slept that morning if it had not been for Tuuli. The dog crawled in the bedroom through the partly open door, lay his strong, reddish paws on the edge of the bed and licked the boy's nose with his rough, warm tongue.

When Misha sneezed, Tuuli barked happily and licked him again, this time on the mouth. But Misha still did not wake up. Then the smart dog gripped the quilt in his teeth and tugged at it. Misha opened his eyes.

"Tuuli!" he cried in surprise. "Are you telling me it is time to go to the lake and pull in the nets?"

Misha dressed quickly and ran out on the porch. There he froze in his tracks.

The net, all silvery from small fish stuck in the mesh, hung on a rail nailed to some posts in the middle of the yard. Mama, Grandmother, and Grandfather stood next to it. Their fingers moved deftly as they pulled the long fish from the mesh and threw them in a large enamel pan.

"Grandfather!" Misha cried with hurt and bitterness in his voice. "What have you done? Why didn't you wake me?"

His mother turned around and motioned to her son:

"Come help! Look how many fish were caught! You have good luck."

"Misha overslept," Grandmother said. "Grandfather tried to wake you early but he couldn't."

"He couldn't, but Tuuli could," Misha grumbled, not looking at anyone.

"Stop pouting and come help," his mother laughed, fixing her flowered scarf with her fingertips.

Misha came over to his mother's side and watched as she pulled the small long, flat fish from the net.

"Take the fish behind the head with your right hand and pull gently. Hold the net with your other hand," his mother explained. She threw a shiny fish in the pan. "See how easy it is?"

But the fish refused to cooperate with Misha. He pulled one this way and that, and finally tore off the head completely.

"What a fumble-fingers," a clear, mocking voice said.

Misha turned. Next to him stood a small girl in a red shift that reached to her knees. She had a red bow on the top of her head which looked like a rooster's comb.

"Just in time to lend a hand," Grandmother said approvingly. "Misha was born in the steppe, Ninchu. Everything here is new to him."

All Ninchu had to do was touch the net with her slim fingers and the obedient fish flew into the pan one after another.

"Do you understand how to do it now?" the girl asked, turning her tanned face and mischievous eyes to Misha. "Or don't you?"

Misha said nothing and only sighed. Soon he managed to free a fish with a greenish-black back. Then another.

"Next time Grandfather and I catch a load of fish, I'll outdo that Ninchu," he thought and he cheered up.

He looked at Grandfather who was standing on the other side of the net. He was also working busily.

"Look at that!" Misha thought in surprise. "His hands are real big and his fingers are thick, but he hasn't crushed one fish."

Then Misha noticed that Grandfather's jet-black beard was covered with small, shiny scales.

Help! Help!

Everyone was silent and busy working. The enamel pan was almost full, yet the slippery fish kept coming.

Suddenly a heart-rending, muffled wail came from the garden: "Help! Help!"

The dog, who was calmly lying at Misha's feet, raced toward the call. He certainly lived up to his name Tuuli, which means "wind". Misha hurried after the dog with Ninchu following.

Coming round the corner of Grandfather's house, Misha saw Vaslei, Pesha's little brother. The little boy was going around in circles on the path, half-smothered in the thick, striped sweater he was trying to pull off. He was really frightened, gasped for breath, and yelled in a terrified



voice. A young rook flew above the little boy cawing excitedly.

"Lift up your arms," Misha said to the little boy. "I said lift up your arms." He pulled the heavy sweater off.

Vaslei was red and perspiring and gulped in fresh air. The rook calmed down and landed on the little boy's shoulder.

"That rook is tame," Ninchu said to Misha. "Pesha found him in the woods last spring. He had fallen from the nest. He's gotten used to us."

The girl was about to pat the rook's smooth head, but he hissed and tried to peck her hand.

"What a nasty bird," Ninchu pouted, and walked away.

"And you are a... a fox," Vaslei said. "My rook doesn't like you."

Ninchu stuck out her tongue and ran to the cliff.

"Misha, come swimming!"

Pesha walked over.

"Good morning!" he said gravely, imitating his father. "Vaslei, why were you howling for the whole village to hear?"

Misha told him the funny thing that had happened.

"What a blockhead," Pesha scolded his brother, and laughed with everyone. Then he turned to Misha: "Let's go swimming. The water in the lake is just right," he said, and he clicked his tongue.

Misha laughed.

"He can't swim, Pesha," Misha's mother said, coming over to the boys.

"He can't swim?" Pesha repeated in surprise. He pushed his old, wrinkled cap back on his head. "No problem. I'll have your Misha swimming in no time. Even Vaslei can dog-paddle."

Grandmother came over to the birch trees. The sleeves of her worn, flannel blouse were rolled up to the elbows.

"Ninchu! Pesha! When you're ready to go home come by, and I'll give you some fish!"

Tricky Ninchu

One day Misha and his mother decided to gather berries in the forest. The evening before Ninchu had brought a whole basket full of ripe, juicy strawberries.

The morning was grey. A cold, damp breeze blew in from the lake. Grandmother predicted rain and tried to talk her daughter and grandson out of going to the woods that day.

"No, we are going," Misha said stubbornly, putting on his sandals. "We aren't made of sugar so we won't melt," he told his grandmother, repeating one of his father's sayings. "You should see the rainstorms we have in the steppe. Last summer we went to visit Papa on the oil field and it just poured. Remember, Mama?"

"All right. Go," Grandmother said, waving her hand. "But you'd better come back with a full basket."

Misha was the first out the door.

The short street with squat houses soon came to an end. Bushy little firs and thin birch trees appeared to the left and right. The closer the two of them got to the forest, the more often they saw fir trees. One courageous tree was growing out of a crack in a huge grey boulder.

There were boulders of all shapes and sizes everywhere. Misha was interested in all of them. If he had been a giant, he would have gathered them up and taken them to where he lived in the steppe.

The old, overgrown lane passed by a small marsh and dived into the wood, which smelled of pine needles and juniper.

They saw a girl walking toward them, yelling at the top of her lungs:

*Summertime is lots of fun.
Get a tan out in the sun.
Oh, la, la, la. Oh, la, la.*

Misha stopped.

"Ninchu's got more berries."

The girl suddenly noticed Grandmother Marya's guests. She took off her bright blue scarf with white stars and hurriedly covered her basket. She greeted them quickly and wanted to hurry by, but Misha's mother stopped her.

"Where did you find the berries?"

"Oh, a long way from here. Don't bother to go there."

"Why?"



"There are thousands of mosquitoes. And there aren't any more berries."

Misha and his mother exchanged glances and went on, scaring jays and kingfishers from the bushes. They wandered through an old clearing where Mama had picked berries as a little girl, and in glades, which were gloomy without the sun. But the bright red berries were few and far between.

Three hours later, when the first heavy drops of rain fell from low clouds, they had not gathered more than a handful. But neither Misha nor his mother were upset. Next time they would be sure to stumble on a field full of strawberries.

Misha noticed a playful squirrel in a tall, old pine. It threw a cone at him and then raced up to the top of the tree. Near a rotten stump he found a mushroom with an orange top, early for that time of year. A little further away Mama found three younger brothers of Misha's huge mushroom.

They took their time going home, covering their heads from the rain with leaves of ferns. The gentle sprinkle soon stopped, probably having decided to wait and gather strength. Now it was clear there would be a real downpour soon. Black stormclouds were rolling in from the north, where the sky was dark and threatening.

When Misha reached the gate to Grandfather's house, he heard Pesha calling to him.

"Guess what, Misha!" he blurted out breathlessly as he leaped from his bicycle. "I worked on the tractor a whole three hours!"

"Wow!" Misha cried. "Does your father let you drive a tractor?"

"Yes," Pesha nodded. "He sat next to me and told me how, of course."

"Aren't you lucky!" Misha paused and then sighed. "We went to gather berries."

Pesha looked in Misha's basket and whistled in disappointment.

"Hardly any at all."

"We weren't very lucky," Mama said. "But Ninchu was. She had a full basket when we saw her."

"You were looking in the wrong places," Pesha said. "You should have gone over there, toward that scorched pine tree. And kept to the edge of the lake. Why didn't Ninchu tell you?"

Misha shrugged his shoulders.

"She probably forgot," Mama said smiling.

"She is a tricky one, that's for sure," Pesha said. He ran his hand over his cheek which was scraped and bleeding. "If you like, we could go together tomorrow."

"Great!" Misha agreed immediately. "What happened to your cheek?"

"It's nothing," Pesha said. "I rode over a stone on my way home."

On the Island

Misha woke suddenly. It seemed that someone had thrown a handful of stinging sand in his face. But when he looked around there was no one in sight. The sun had already set and large waves rolled in to the shore one after another. Grandfather's boat was slowly moving away from the beach, rocking unsteadily.

"Peee-shaa!" Misha shouted in fright, leaping to his feet. "Pesha! Where are you?"

But there was no answer. Only the seagulls cawed noisily as they flew over the choppy lake.

Some fishing trip! The boat would float off and then what could they do on this desert island with those dark pine trees which were frightening even in good weather?

Misha raced into the water without thinking. The first wave crashed over his head. He snorted and began to flay his arms desperately.

"If I can just get to the boat," he thought, trying to overcome his fear. "I need ... to move my arms ... less."

He was now quite close to the boat. But Misha was worn out and couldn't manage to grab a hold of its slippery stern. He lost his grip and went under water. Luckily a wave came and pushed him to the surface. He grabbed the stern. As soon as he crawled into the boat he picked up the oars.

Pesha ran down to the shore from a pine grove, and shouted through his cupped hands:

"Harder, Misha! Pull harder!"

Misha did not even turn around. Soon the boat dashed up on the gently sloping beach.

Misha leaped out on to the cold sand and only then looked his friend in the eye:

"Where were you?"

"I went to the woods. I thought I'd see if the bilberries were ripe while you slept," Pesha said guiltily. "I never thought the waves would get so high. The lake was quiet this morning."

Misha looked out over the lake, which had grown dark all the way to the other shore where he could hardly make out the rooftops. He had never seen Lake Vedlozero so frightening and unfriendly. But now that his friend was close by, Misha was not afraid.

The Search for Daisy

They were drinking tea and eating Karelian potato pies Grandmother had baked when Ninchu ran in crying.

"Daisy didn't come back with the herd," she said. She wiped away her tears with her hand, but they kept rolling down her cheeks. "Daddy will let me have it."

Pesha and Misha looked at one another and stood up.

"Let's go, Ninchu. And stop bawling!"

"Such trouble," Grandmother wailed. "And Grandfather is away visiting."

"Don't worry, we'll find Daisy ourselves," Pesha told Grandmother. "And don't you worry either," he said to Misha's mother. "Could Vaslei stay with you until Mama comes? She should be back from the farm any minute."

It did not take them long to get ready. On the road to the forest Pesha spoke to sniveling Ninchu.

"I'll go to the right to the marshes. You and Misha keep to the left to the cape. You know that area."

They split up on the edge of the forest. Pesha walked fast, leaping dashingly over stones and never once looking back. He went toward the tall pines which stretched all the way up to the dark, starless sky.

Misha and Ninchu turned off onto a winding path leading toward a pale white birch grove.

At first they walked in silence. Ninchu was in front and Misha walked a short distance behind, waving a stick he had found. The deeper they went into the forest the darker it got. The ground gave off a strong smell of rotten leaves, moss and night flowers.

"Dai-sy!" Ninchu wailed. "Dai-sy!"

But Daisy did not answer. Before they knew it they had reached the cape.

"I bet fierce wolves got Daisy," Ninchu began to cry again.

"Don't be silly," Misha said, trying to sound brave, but he looked around cautiously. "What is that on the hill?"

"An old chapel," Ninchu whined. "Let's go over and rest on the porch. My feet hurt."

They walked through the dewy grass and got soaked to the waist. An old tumbledown chapel, that looked like a fairy-tale witch house, stood on a sandy mound in front of them. For an instant the moon peeked out from above the roof, but then disappeared behind the tall pine trees.

"It's so quiet my ears are ringing. It's like a deserted kingdom," Misha thought, looking at the dark, whispering pine trees, the gloomy, silent boulders and the lake which was blanketed with fog.

No sooner had Misha put his foot on the shaky steps than a low mooing came from behind the chapel.

"That's Daisy!" Ninchu cried, grabbing Misha's arm.

The children found the cow in a pine grove behind the chapel. She had strayed into a ditch with steep sides and could not get out.

"Daisy, Daisy," Ninchu wailed. She sat down on the edge of the ditch. "How in the world did you get in there?" She did not know whether to laugh or cry with joy.

"How are we going to get her out?"

"Wait here. I'll be right back," Misha said. He ran off into the darkness.

Soon he reappeared. He was panting heavily and dragging a board.

"It was lying in the road," he said, recovering his breath. He lowered one end of the heavy board into the ditch. "Call her. Now she can climb out."



But nothing came of his plan. The foolish cow mooed and mooed, but would not step on the board. The children probably would have spent the entire night on the cape if Grandfather and Pesha had not come to their aid. Ninchu cried out in fright when Tuuli bounded over to Misha, yelping.

"Over here, Grandfather!" Misha yelled. "We found Daisy, but she is in a ditch."

"Don't worry," Grandfather chuckled. "We'll get her out."

Pesha appeared from under a low-hanging fir branch after Grandfather.

"We brought a rope," he said proudly. "We'll tie it to her horns and have her out of that hole in no time."

Best Friends

Misha and Pesha were sitting on the wide pier which Grandfather had once made for Grandmother. She rinsed clothes on it.

They had come out of the water covered with goosebumps and with their teeth chattering. It was wonderful to stretch out on the hot planks warmed by the sun.

The boys had spent all afternoon on the lake. They swam, dove and gathered white water-lilies.

"When will I ever come here again?" Misha thought sadly. "It seems like Mama and I just arrived yesterday, but almost two months have gone by. How many times did I help Grandfather with the nets? Or went gathering berries in the forest? I've eaten buckets of strawberries and cloudberry and bilberry. I'd never even heard of cloudberry or bilberry before."

And how would he get along without his best friend Pesha? He sighed. Pesha put his hand on Misha's dark-brown shoulder.

"Don't be so gloomy," he said. "Summer will come again next year. Why don't you come back here during vacation?" He paused and then grinned. "Wasn't it worth it to give up that basket?"

"It sure was," Misha nodded. "Remember the look on Ninchu's face when she ran into the yard and asked if we knew who brought them a whole basket of bilberries?"

The boys looked at one another and burst out laughing. The rook flew over. It circled above the pier and landed next to Pesha. He was about to pat the bird on its ruffled head, but the rook jumped away from his hand. It dropped a fat, green caterpillar it held in its beak, cawed, and flew off toward the quiet birch trees.

"Look at what a good bird he is," Pesha said. "He was worried that you were hungry so he brought you a caterpillar."

"When I get home I'm going to get a bird too," Misha said smiling. "Mama said I could. She said I will be more responsible since I will be in the second grade this fall. Maybe you can come visit us next summer?"

Pesha raised his head and thought for a while.

"There's a long winter ahead, so there'll be plenty of time to think it over. One way or the other, you and I will see each other next year. Let's shake on it."

"O. K.," Misha agreed. And he held out his strong brown, calloused hand.

GRANNY FISA

The Green Pike

I met that round-headed boy near Khomyakov Pool. He was sitting in the fork of an old willow-tree that hung over the pool. The boy was holding two long fishing rods in his hands.

My boat was anchored in peaceful backwater not far from the pool. I had a good view of that lonely fisherman astride a strong branch.

Somewhere out in the steppe, far beyond the quiet Volozhka, a storm was gathering. That was why the fish were not biting.

I had already reeled in my line and was sitting in the stern enjoying the evening coolness after the hot summer day.

Dark storm clouds rolled on the horizon and streaks of lightning pierced the sky. The reflection of a white, new moon calmly floated in the middle of the river. There were a few bright splashes in the gloomy pool. It seemed that hungry pike were snapping at the moon. But the light, narrow crescent was not to be caught. It slipped away



from them sliding over a silent wave. When the ripples disappeared it was back in its former place.

I stared into the distant gloom. Everything promised a thunderstorm soon. It was time to head for home. Then I remembered the small, determined lad on the old willow.

"Hey! Young fellow! Do you want a ride back?"

The boy did not answer right away. He slowly reeled in one line, and then the other. He sighed sadly and only then asked mistrustfully:

"Are you a vacationer?"

"Yes," I nodded.

"Are you the one staying at Martyanovna's?"

"That's right."

"What do you know!" the boy said with a broad smile. "This is the first time I've seen you. Last week my Granny Fisa said that someone from the city was living at Martyanovna's."

Graceful as a cat, he climbed along the uneven branch hanging over the pool. He reached solid ground without falling off and disappeared in the thick willow bushes that grew along the steep bank. The boy came out of the bushes right next to my boat. In one hand he held his fishing rods and in the other held a pail.

"You caught something?" I asked in surprise.

"Nothing much," he said like a grown-up. "Four gudgeons and three little perch. That's all for the whole day!" He put his pail in the bow of the boat.

"Not a bad catch," I said. "What's your name?"

"Zhenya," the boy said. He pushed back his cap with a torn visor and scratched his forehead.

"What do you think?" he asked. "Should I let the little ones go so they can grow and get fatter?"

"Sensible thought," I agreed. "They'll be much bigger by autumn."

Zhenya sighed and pulled his cap down to his eyebrows. Suddenly he grabbed the pail and poured the water, fish and all, into the river.

"You're in luck, you dumb little fish."

We pushed off from the shore and moved downstream with the current. I handled the oars, and Zhenya sat in the stern. The rowlocks squeaked gently. Somewhere on the other bank a foal neighed.

The moon got tangled in wispy clouds and its reflection in the river

was blurred. A large, bright star raced behind our fast-moving boat.

Suddenly there was a loud splash near the stern and something heavy dropped onto the bottom of the boat.

"Help!" Zhenya shouted in fright.

"What's the matter?" I asked, dropping the oars.

But he could not say a word. At that instant there was a flash of lightning which lit up the sky and I saw a large, green pike beneath Zhenya's legs which he had pulled up to his chest. It flipped and beat the bottom of the boat with its tail. I grabbed a wooden scoop and stunned the fish.

"It ... it jumped out of the water right into the boat," Zhenya said hoarsely when he found his voice.

"Well, well," I said in amazement. "You and I will have fish soup tonight."

Zhenya chuckled.

"Why don't we tell everyone that we battled with that pike a long time before we landed him in our net?"

That evening over fish soup I told Martyanovna about meeting Zhenya.

"He is a good boy even though he is an orphan," she said with a sigh. "His father ... the boy wasn't even a year old when he drowned in the Volga in an autumn storm. His boat capsized. And his mother Nastasya was such a hard worker. But she must have overdone it. Her heart couldn't take it. Now he lives with his Granny Fisa. That old woman is a real treasure, believe you me. Everybody around here knows her, both old and young."

I had already realized that my landlady was usually right. It was true this time too.

Granny Fisa

Zhenya remembered how his mother used to praise Granny.

"Granny has magic hands. She sticks a twig in the ground and by spring the twig has come alive and is covered with buds. Or, for example, a kid is weak when it's born and everyone is sure the little goat will die. But Granny gives him extra milk for a week and whispers gentle



words in his ear, and soon the kid is racing around the yard. She can even charm blood from flowing. Honestly!"

Zhenya himself knew what magic hands his grandmother had.

Last summer their neighbor took Granny and him to Gavrilov Cape early one morning in his boat. It was the perfect time of year to gather blackberries.

Granny Fisa exclaimed with pleasure when she saw the blackberry patch. All the branches, from top to bottom, were full of large, ripe, bluish berries.

"Look at all the berries," the old woman cried as she carefully raised a heavy branch. "I don't remember when I've seen such a good crop."

Long before noon the two of them filled three large baskets. (One was a present for their neighbor.) Then they rested on the beach and had a bite to eat while waiting for the boat.

Granny settled down for a nap in the shade of a willow tree, while Zhenya swam and caught little fish in pools of standing water with his tee-shirt. When he leaped out onto the beach, blue and shivering, he cut the big toe of his right foot on a piece of broken glass. Bright red blood poured from the deep wound.

"Gran-nny!" he wailed, hopping on one foot. "I cut myself!"

Granny woke up from her nap.

"Sit down and press on the cut with your fingers," she said calmly. "I'll be right back."

Groaning, she got up and hurried to an inlet with tall reeds. She returned with a cat's-tail. After washing the cut with water she peeled off the upper layer of the stalk and pressed the white, soft, cotton-like insides to the bleeding wound. Then she bound his foot tightly with her scarf.

"Don't whine. You are a man," Granny told Zhenya. "By evening you'll be as good as new."

And she was right. That evening Zhenya played a ball game with the other boys.

As soon as the old woman went out on the porch in the morning with a dish full of mash, she was surrounded by chickens. A young rooster would even flow over to her shoulder and give a shrill, immature crow.

Granny Fisa took in a little jackdaw, which had fallen from its nest and a starling with a broken wing, and a silly, orphaned little hare. One

young rook lived in their house all winter and even learned to talk.

Every morning, Grisha, the rook, would sit on the stove and call out:

"Por-r-r-idge! Gr-r-r-isha por-r-r-idge!"

"Wait, you impatient fellow," Granny would grumble good-naturedly.

"Let me get my grandson off to school and then I'll feed you."

Granny Fisa had bunches of all kinds of medicinal herbs hanging behind the stove, in the pantry and in the entryway. She boiled them to make medicines, and they really helped the villagers cure different illnesses.

When the bull Fierce, the terror of the village, broke his chain and roamed the streets, only Granny Fisa could subdue him.

Holding some ugly-looking stems of strange herbs in her hand she would bravely walk up to the furious bull, who was pawing the ground with his hooves. She walked slowly and spoke gently.

"Aren't you ashamed of yourself, you big bully. Don't stamp your feet at me. I'm not a bit afraid of you. What did I say? Calm down, old fellow. I'm not going to hurt you."

The bull froze and sighed deeply. Then he lifted his foaming snout and reached out to Granny's hand for the herbs.

She patted his head between his sharp horns, picked up the end of the chain, and took the quiet animal back to the pen.

There was another interesting story. Once last autumn Zhenya and Granny were sitting on their old porch, preparing mushrooms for salt-ing. Suddenly a hedgehog appeared from out of nowhere. It waddled right up to Granny's foot and poked it with its nose.

"He must be a tame one," Zhenya said in surprise. "Maybe he's the one the Khoprovs had in a cage?"

"No, Grandson, you're mistaken," Granny said, shaking her head. "It looks like he came to complain of some trouble. He's asking for help because he knows people are smarter than he is."

Granny lifted the trusting hedgehog on her lap and patiently began to look through its quills.

"I was right," she said. "Look at these big fat leeches sticking to his skin. They give him no peace."

Zhenya was so surprised he sat motionless for a few minutes. When he spoke, there was hurt in his voice.

"Why did he come to you and not to me? I would have squashed those awful leeches too."

"How do I know, my curious one," Granny laughed good-naturedly.

That was the kind of Granny Zhenya had.

Sutton's Tricks

Each morning I went for a swim. Martyanovna's house was a stone's throw from the sandy bank of the river, which was calm and slow moving. That is why I found the energy to go swimming every day.

Once, coming back from my morning swim, I walked into the house and froze on the doorstep. The whole floor, from the stove to the table in the front corner, was covered with scraps of newspaper.

"What's going on?" I thought, still not moving from where I stood. Martyanovna had left at dawn with her farm team and there were no children around. Who had made this mess?

When I looked around the clean, tidy room more carefully I was even more surprised.

Someone had tossed a crumpled matchbox and a pen on my cot. Matches and coins were scattered on the striped rug. An open purse lay on the chair. There was also a rusty screw next to it. How in the world had it got there?

I straightened up the house and sat down at the table. I twirled the screw in my fingers and wondered who could have played such a nasty trick. Could that mischievous Nikita, the son of Mikhailych, the driver, have dared to make such a mess in the house?

The driver lived across the lane and the neighbors were always complaining about Nikita. He was a real mischief-maker. The strict, silent Mikhailych often punished his naughty son, and the boy would cry loudly for the whole village to hear. But he soon forgot his father's lessons and was off again.

"I'll find Nikita and talk to him man to man," I decided. "I'll tell him it is wrong to go into someone's house without permission and to make a mess where you shouldn't. I'll tell him he is almost grown-up



and it is time he learned to behave. After all, he will be in the third grade this fall."

But I did not see Nikita that day and I did not bother to tell Martyanovna what had happened. She was tired when she came home that evening.

When the two of us were eating supper in the kitchen, she suddenly noticed the rusty screw on the windowsill. It was the one I had found on the chair that morning.

"What do you know!" she exclaimed. She shook her head and picked up the screw. "Where did you come from, you rascal?" She smiled. "Two years ago Tikhon, the carpenter, fixed that window frame. When he began to screw on the hinges one of the screws fell on the floor. He looked high and low for that screw, but he never found it. He had to use a nail instead. And now it's turned up. I'm sure it's the same one."

"I found it on the floor," I said in confusion. "Tomorrow I will definitely talk to Nikita," I thought. "And I'll be sure to ask him where he found that screw."

As I was leaving the next morning to go swimming, I carefully locked the padlock on the front door. I had never done that before. All I left open was the window in the main room.

When I came back I was again met with a surprise. This time two boxes of matches were scattered about the floor and several pages were torn out of the magazine which the postman had brought Martyanovna the day before. And that was not all. There was a pool of milk on the kitchen table. The earthenware pot had rolled under the bench.

Not wasting any more time, I went off in search of Nikita. Two girls were playing dolls across the street. I asked if they had seen him.

"He is not home. His father took him into town to visit his aunt," the girl with white ribbons in her braids said seriously, like a grown-up. "Do you need him right away?"

I hesitated, and then told the girls about the strange things that were happening in our house.

"Oh, that's not Nikita, but Sutton the Glutton. He's the one playing tricks at your house," the girl with the white ribbons cried as soon as I had finished.

She turned to her friend, a swarthy, bright-eyed girl.

"As soon as you started coming here more often your Sutton began to cause trouble on our street," she said. "Yesterday he unwound Grandmother's ball of yarn over the whole house. It's a good thing I found it in time."

The swarthy girl looked down and blushed. She smoothed the ruffles on her dress and said in a hurt voice:

"But it's not my fault. I don't teach him to do those bad things."

"Who is Sutton the Glutton?" I asked.

"Let Alyona call her little friend herself," the first girl said. Alyona put her doll down on the grass, and shouted:

"Sutton! Sutton the Glutton!"

"Caw, caw," someone answered from behind the old bathhouse with a lopsided window.

A moment later a black-headed young magpie flew over, landed on the path, and limped over to Alyona.

She sat down on her heels and patted the magpie's smooth back.

"You want something sweet, my silly little bird?" she asked. Then she turned to us. "What do you want Sutton to do?" she asked angrily. "He is still little and has no mother. When he grows up he will know not to fly into other people's houses. It's only now that he sticks his nose into everything. Right, Sutton?"

The bird cocked his head to one side and fixed one shiny black eye on Alyona.

I fumbled in my pockets and found a piece of candy. I put it on my palm and bent down to the magpie.

"This is for you, Sutton."

The bird did not keep me waiting. He hopped over and grabbed the candy from my hand. Then he swiftly pulled off the wrapper and gobbled the candy down.

"A real glutton," the girl with the white ribbons said. "How did he get like that, Alyona?"

I lived in that village another three weeks. The summer weather was very pleasant—not too hot with an occasional warm rain.

Sutton the Glutton and I made friends. Every morning he flew to my window, picked at the glass and begged for a goody.

Whenever I left to go swimming or to take a walk in the forest I always shut the door and the window. Sutton and I were friends and he even sat on my shoulder or knee, but I still had to be careful.

Crow Swings

It was almost time for me to leave the quiet village. Zhenya, Granny Fisa's grandson, offered to go with me to the station to buy a train ticket.

"Why don't we head straight through the wood?" he suggested. He had come over early that morning. "What do you say? It's no fun to walk along the road."

"All right," I agreed. "We can listen to the birds and admire the flowers."

We crossed the street and turned into a lane. A boy in a torn shirt was walking toward us.

"It's Nikita the warrior," Zhenya said gaily. "When did you get back from town?"

Nikita wiped his eyes with his fist and moved aside. But Zhenya grabbed his arm.

"Why don't you come with us to the station? Where did you do that?" he asked, shaking his head and pointing to Nikita's shirt.

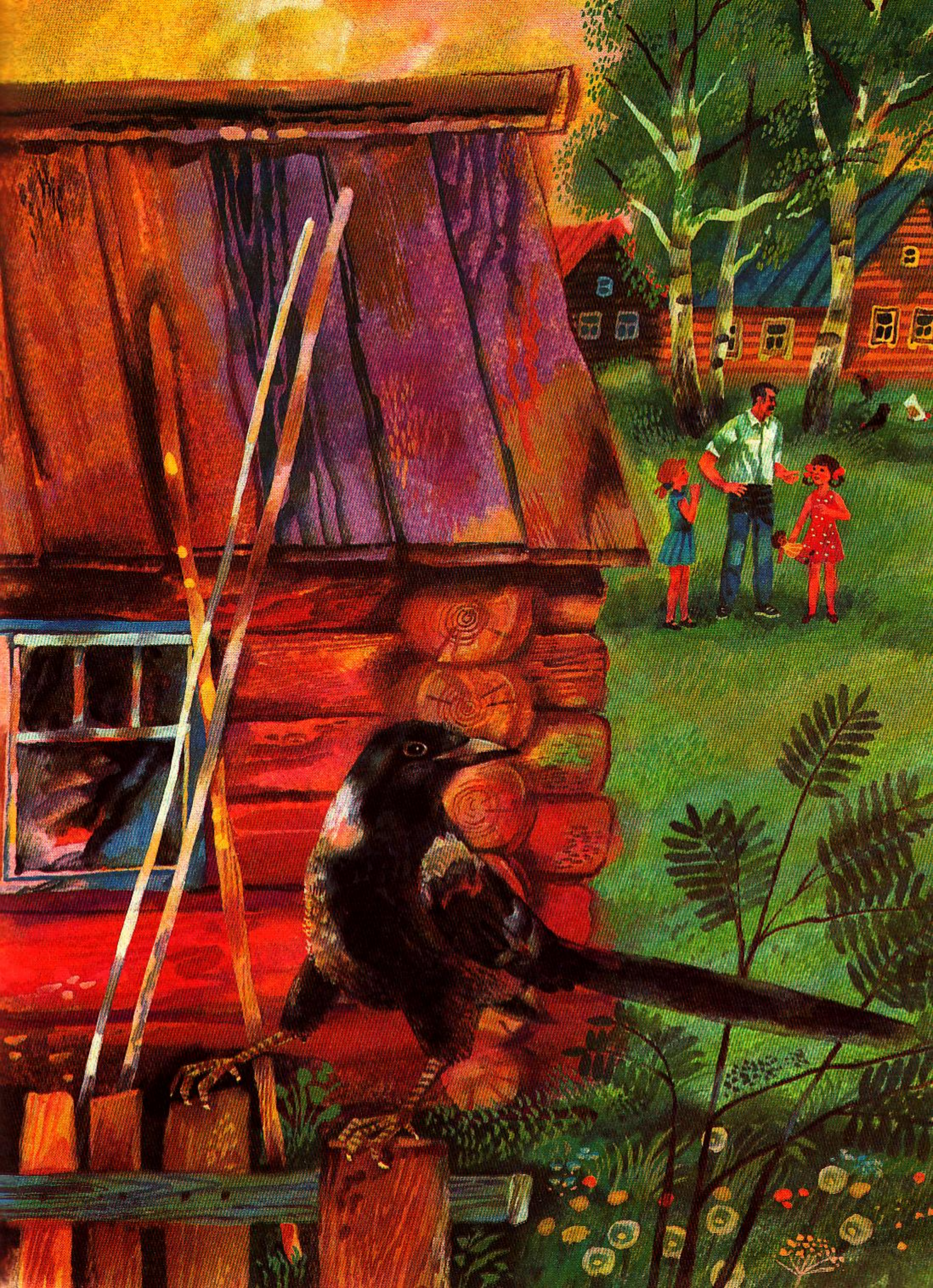
"I ripped it jumping over the fence," Nikita said angrily. "Alyona's brother was after me. They thought I wanted to catch their Sutton the Glutton. Who needs their old Sutton, anyway?"

"Don't worry. When we get back from the station Granny will fix your shirt in no time."

"Honest?" Nikita asked.

"Honest," Zhenya said and gently punched Nikita. The three of us headed for the woods.

We walked through grass wet with dew. We passed leaning wattle fences. Nikita pulled out a dry stick and pointed it as if it were a sub-machine-gun. Soon the gardens came to an end and we reached the edge of the woods. A grey mist spread over the grass between the trees. Here and there thick wisps of fog surrounded the bottoms of birch and asp trees. Then it seemed as if the trees were hanging in the air.



The sweet smell of lime blossoms came from somewhere nearby.

"Smell it?" Zhenya asked, looking back.

"Yes," I answered, smiling.

Leaving wet tracks in the tall June grass, we entered the woods. Suddenly a bright colored jay flew off almost from under Nikita's feet. It disappeared in a nut bush which was gently lit by the morning rays of the sun.

Often I wanted to stop to admire a clearing of golden dandelions or a little round lake full of clean spring water. But the boys walked quickly and I did not want to lag behind.

Suddenly Zhenya left the path and stopped near some young pine trees. He shook his fist at Nikita, as if telling him not to move. Nikita was just about to ask what the matter was when a crow cawed nearby.

"Look between the branches," Zhenya whispered. He was flushed with excitement. "Walk quietly or you'll scare it."

Zhenya pushed aside a prickly pine branch and Nikita and I saw a large crow with a big beak. It sat on a leafless asp branch and was swaying back and forth just like on a swing.

When the branch stopped moving the crow flapped its wings as if it was about to fly away, and the branch again began to sway.

"Caw, caw," the crow shouted happily.

I don't know how long the playful bird would have amused itself, but a dog barked somewhere nearby and it flew to the top of a birch tree.

"Crow! Hey, crow! Swing some more!" Nikita shouted, and waved his "submachine-gun".

But the crow ignored him. It did not even look our way.

At the station I bought a ticket and treated the boys to some ice cream. We returned home by the same path.

Two days later I left the quiet, peaceful village I had grown to love, with its kind, friendly people.





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